

Humble

This was the way death should arrive, the way it so often did in the mountains - after a lifetime of hard work and love, tended to by family and friends. If only death didn't arrive with so much pain - an unexpected, knife-sharp curve in the road at the end of the journey.

Lark Mills left her grandmother sleeping. She closed the bedroom door, shutting out the faded wallpaper and sun-soaked hardwood floors, the rise and fall of Gran's frail chest. She went downstairs to her own bedroom and changed out of restaurant clothes, instead putting on shorts and a white tee shirt. August in West Virginia simmered like steam trapped inside a soup pot.

She went into the kitchen, intending to peel potatoes but instead finding herself transfixed at the window over the sink. The yard stretched under golden light interposed now with purple shadows. Tree boughs at the forest line hung unusually still as if waiting. Listening.

Lark forced herself to step away. There was still time. She didn't need to dwell on it now.

Behind her, Snoop slept under the scarred, oak-top table. Part hound and part lab, he stirred when Lark preheated the oven and removed a flank steak from the fridge. She dredged it in flour and placed it in a dish with mushroom soup. While the steak baked, she peeled and sliced potatoes and dropped them into a skillet of hot oil. She cooked without thinking, her hands moving on their own to prepare a meal she'd made a hundred times in this very kitchen.

"There's still time," she said out loud, and Snoop cocked his head as if politely acknowledging that she had spoken. By the time the smells of gravy and crisp potatoes filled the room, the linoleum floor and oak cabinets had been touched by familiar evening colors.

Opal was fading but not gone, still able to laugh and greet visitors and sip iced tea on the front porch. But Lark could feel it, the way time stretches when the day is nearing its end. She wondered how many incandescent August evenings like this were left. Which sunset would close out her grandmother's life with a shimmering display of color, like well-deserved fireworks.

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Lark had a family - a mother and father, a brother and sister. She loved them all, of course. But without her grandmother, she would be as uprooted as a sapling following a storm. Twenty-eight years old and untethered.

Outside, car tires crunched on gravel. Lark returned to the window in time to see a blue Nissan Altima trudge up the curve of the hill and emerge through the trees. It disappeared towards the front of the house. Lark frowned, not recognizing the vehicle.

She wiped her hands on a dish towel and headed towards the front hall, but the doorbell peeled first. Snoop howled. Lark unbolted the front door, not truly registering her guest until the screen door was half-open. She stopped short.

"It's Lark, right?" the man said. "Remember me?"

Of all the times she'd imagined seeing him again, not once had he said something as stupid as this. She'd imagined turning around and seeing him in the back of church or looking up and finding him at a table in her restaurant. They would chuckle awkwardly, make small talk, reveal what they "did" these days. Then she'd say something nice about his dad. He might ask about her grandmother.

But never was there any scenario where they acted like they might not know each other. Never had she planned to play coy. *Oh yeah, it's Daniel Piper, right? Madison High?*

In the ensuing years since he'd left home, she had never allowed herself to daydream far. Some memories were best left unvisited. But she had wondered, like any friend would do. She just wanted to know where he went, what he was doing. It was the mystery of his life that hurt, as if he had died but didn't have the decency to let anyone know.

Did she remember him? *Of course, she wanted to say. It's been twelve years, not thirty, and even then...* But she was too startled to say it, couldn't decide if she was waking or dreaming, his face was so unexpected.

"What...?" She swallowed and realized she was still behind the screened door. She stepped onto the porch, summer heat immediately washing through her hair. "What are you doing here?"

He looked appropriately embarrassed. Twelve years ago, his face had been boyish. Now it carried a harder version of the same handsome charm - a lean face, firm jaw under a couple day's scruff, brown eyes beneath sharp eyebrows. His sandy brown hair was still shaggy. In her opinion, it was a little too long for a man in his early thirties.

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“Cole Cartwright is missing,” he responded. “I’m part of a volunteer search and rescue group assisting police.”

“Helping the police? But you don’t live here.”

His hands disappeared into worn jean pockets. “I moved back in with Dad about a week ago.”

A week ago and she hadn’t heard through town gossip? That sounded like a flat-out lie. Lark glanced over his head and saw only the sedan parked next to her blue Tacoma.

“Where’s your *group*?” she asked.

“I work faster alone. Got a tip that I should check Buck Ridgeline.”

“That’s county property.”

“Shortest way there is through your woods.”

She lifted an eyebrow at his intimate working knowledge of her property. How could he appear here like this, as if he belonged? She nearly despised him for his straightforward words, battering into years of carefully constructed imagination.

She crossed her arms, the porch floor boards rough under her feet. “The woods have overgrown themselves. Think you could find your way there?”

His grin was strangely sober. “I’ll have to give it my best shot.”

She sighed. “I could show you.”

“I won’t say no.”

Lark scratched at Snoop’s ears. He was no longer growling or whining but, like any good guard dog, sniffing feverishly around Daniel’s boots as if in hopeful expectation of finding an illicit drug or cheese.

“I just finished fixing dinner. Let me take a plate up to my grandmother, and I’ll be right out.”

“You might want shoes, too.”

She manufactured a smile, knowing it was tight and that he’d read her discomfort like an out-of-tune note on a piano. “Those would be helpful.”

He nodded at her and meandered to the right side of the porch, easing himself onto the wicker swing. He leaned forward, gray tee shirt already damp with sweat, his gaze sitting comfortably on the forest line. Now the tree branches bobbed and waved as if greeting their visitor.

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Lark stepped back inside, slightly perturbed by how easily he seemed to fit in. *If* she ever saw him again, she'd half-expected him to appear well-dressed and aloof, *city-fied*, as her grandmother would say.

She prepared a plate, filled a glass with water, and carried the tray upstairs. Opal was awake and reclining on the four-poster bed, her hands fiddling with the oxygen cord.

Lark quickly set down the tray. "You need help with that?"

"Just a little short on breath."

Gently, Lark looped the tubing around Opal's ears and positioned the opening into her nostrils. "Better?"

"Fit as a fiddle."

"I brought dinner."

"Oh goody." Opal pushed herself to a sitting position. Her voice was always raspy, but today it came in short bursts as she sucked in air. "I can come downstairs."

"I like spoiling you." She set the tray on her grandmother's lap and unfolded a napkin.

"Who came to the door?"

Lark busied herself combing through pill bottles on the nightstand. "Part of the search and rescue team looking for Cole Cartwright." She opened a bottle and dropped two tablets into her hand. "Time for these."

Opal took them obediently. "Do they really think he's lost out there? Boy grew up here."

"They found his truck at a trailhead more than two days ago. Maybe he's injured."

Opal caught her gaze. *Or worse*, her eyes said. The hills weren't without their perils, particularly after nightfall.

Lark kissed her grandmother's forehead. "I'm going out to help. I should be back before dark."

Downstairs, she grabbed hiking boots and a flashlight out of the hall closet and reemerged on the front porch. Daniel stood at the railing inspecting a hanging fern. He turned to look at her. She looked away.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yep."

Snoop kept pace at her side as she crossed the yard to the west of the house and found the path into the woods. Shadows greeted them. The trees grew old and tired here, the

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ground a snarl of roots and fallen limbs, thorns and vines. A toppled oak split the path and Lark searched for a way around it, eventually deciding to climb over it. She twisted her body over claw-like branches.

“Like I said - overgrown,” she laughed, feeling self-conscious.

“You weren’t kidding,” Daniel said.

“It’s a steep climb to the top of this hill, then we’ll cut down before going up again onto Buck Ridgeline. A mile or so.” A sharp branch caught the inside of her thigh and she sucked in a breath. “Why are we checking the ridge?”

“Some kid thought he heard gun shots up there a couple days ago. Didn’t think anything of it until he heard that someone was missing.”

Lark swallowed a sour taste. “What are you expecting to find?”

Daniel shrugged, but it was a pretense at casualness. “Not sure, honestly. Do you know Cole Cartwright?”

“Sort of. His mom comes into the restaurant to complain about him every now and then. Sounds like he’s been doing about the same as most other boys who don’t find gainful employment out of high school.”

“Marijuana?”

Lark couldn’t hold back a laugh. “You have been gone a while.”

“Prescription narcotics, then.”

“And heroin once money gets tight.”

They trudged in silence for several minutes, the woods quiet outside the *scrape-crunch* of their boots and Snoop’s panting as he pulled ahead.

“So,” Daniel began. “You’ve been here living here since...” He cleared his throat. “You know. High school?”

Lark quickened her pace. “I started working at my grandparents’ restaurant and never left.” She wiped sweaty palms against her shirt. “I’m not sure why.”

She didn’t know why she added this. It wasn’t as if she was embarrassed that she’d stayed in Humble. She loved managing a restaurant. Took deep pleasure in the days when it was just her and the sunrise prepping for opening. When she greeted the first customer with a cup of dark roast coffee and a cinnamon roll right out of the oven. She even liked the

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late evenings when she sat alone at the counter finishing the inventory order, not leaving until the moon was out.

She was *happy* in Humble, happy with her life.

“Where have you been?” she asked and quickly chose to rephrase. “Where have you been living?”

“Charlotte, North Carolina. I was an engineer in a consulting firm down there.”

“What made you come back?”

Daniel didn’t meet her gaze. “Oh, just felt like it was time.” He still carried a trace of the easy, rolling accent of the region. She wondered if he used that in Charlotte, too, or if he was turning it on for her benefit.

They reached the summit and Lark paused for breath. It’d been years since she’d climbed this particular hill. “We don’t exactly have many engineering firms in Humble.”

“I’m going to help Dad for a while with the construction business.”

“Ah. How is Gary?”

“Doing fine. Just getting older. Needs someone around to...tend to things.”

Lark studied him for a moment, curious if he remembered past conversations. If he would acknowledge the truth they’d once shared.

“Beautiful out here,” he said instead. “I haven’t been in these woods in a decade.” He took a deep breath. Lark smelled it, too - earth and old leaves and water trickling between moss-covered rocks - the smells of home.

He stretched his arms over his head. “Didn’t realize how much I’ve missed it.”

Lark turned and kept walking. It had always been unclear to her if Daniel had left because of his father, the verbal vitriol and occasional physical abuse. Or if he had left because of *her*.

Perhaps in the end, she was nothing more to him than a symbol of all that he wanted to leave behind.

They found him just as the sun left the sky. By now the clearing was saturated in purple twilight – the maples and wind-spurred grass, even the air itself, weighed down by the

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quietness, the held-breath of encroaching night. Only in the mountains could night bring such a descending sense of aloneness.

Cold chills prickled the back of his neck as Daniel Piper knelt beside the body. He didn't reach for a pulse. The man had been long dead – cold and purple. Not the purple of twilight but of bruising and decay. There appeared to be a single gunshot in the center of his chest, the blood dried black on his red tee shirt.

“White male, early twenties,” he said mechanically, his own voice hollow in his ears. “Longish brown hair. Hundred-forty pounds?” He turned towards Lark. “This him?”

She had gone pale, one hand held against her throat, the other limp at her side. She stepped closer, boots swishing against matted grass. She bent beside Daniel. The humidity rested like dew in her French braid, the fine hair around her face curling. She tucked it behind her ears.

“No,” she said at last. She reached out to touch him but pulled back as if she could feel the coldness hovering above him. “No, that's his brother.”

Daniel breathed out, sickened. After an adolescence spent hunting in these mountains and a stint in the military, he had seen his portion of death. But not like this, not in small town Appalachia, cloaked in summer twilight and surreptitious motive. Shot and abandoned.

Even Snoop appeared disturbed as he sniffed around their perimeter, tail lowered, occasionally whimpering.

“Our missing person is still out there.” Daniel stood and eyed a circle around the body, checking for a weapon, footprints, anything awry. “What's his name?”

“Trent Cartwright.”

“Did anyone know he was missing?”

“I guess his family assumed he was at college. Sophomore at Marshall.”

He checked his phone. “You got cell service?”

Lark slipped the phone from her shorts pocket. “No.”

It would take at least thirty minutes to hike back to the house. Already shadows were filling the clearing with surprising swiftness. The police would need a spotlight by the time they got out here, if they could find their way at all.

“We better get moving.”

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“I hate to leave him.”

Daniel looked into her face and noticed for the first time that she was as sickened as he was but not afraid. Whatever color her eyes were, they reflected violet in this light, depthless and perceptive.

“He’ll be all right,” Daniel responded reflexively.

“His mama... She...”

“You can’t think about that.”

Lark’s mouth drew tight, her gaze fixated on the bloody hole in Trent Cartwright’s chest.

“It’s not supposed to be this way,” she said softly.

Daniel touched her elbow, understanding but not able to respond. The words stuck in his throat, right next to the need to vomit.

He pulled her to her feet. “We should hurry.”

They backed away until they hit the edge of the clearing, both watching the body, checking the covering of trees. Afraid to look away.

Finally, Lark stirred. “All right.” He watched her tear away her gaze with effort. “All right. Let’s go.”

As always, the woods were different under cover of night, not just an alteration of appearance but of mood, as if a distinctly separate presence took over once light was gone. They tore through overgrowth and clambered over fallen logs as if pursued, going too fast but unable to slow down, both eager to be outside the woods before complete darkness fell.

Daniel felt physical relief when the lights of the Mills’ farmhouse glowed through the lacework of tree branches. He rechecked his phone. “I’ll call it in.”

“I need to check on Gran,” Lark said, breaking into a jog as they finally cleared the trees and reached the grass. “Come in when you’re done,” she called over her shoulder.

Daniel slowed to a walk, breathing heavily as he crossed the lawn. The porch lights lit the stone path up to the white clapboard house, potted ferns casting shadows into the yard. The lonely house soaked up quiet like a cotton towel absorbing water. He imagined that normally he would find it peaceful. Tonight it felt unnatural.

His call was finally transferred to Olson, the town’s longest-running sheriff who answered with a sharp, “Dan.”

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“Hey, I’m up at Opal Mills’ place. I checked out Buck Ridgeline.” He cleared his throat, bile returning with the memory. “Lark and I went out. We found a body. Lark identified him as Trent Cartwright. Single gunshot wound to the chest.”

Olson swore. “How long do you think it’s been?”

Daniel glimpsed something wet on the walkway, glinting under the porch lights.

“If I had to guess I’d say it’s been a couple days.”

He bent to inspect more closely. Small puddles led up the path and onto the first porch step.

“I’ll call the county examiner,” Olson replied. “We’ll be out as quick as we can. Can you stick around?”

“Sure, I’ll stay put, although Lark will be the better candidate to get you guys out there. It’s a hike.”

Olson hung up, and Daniel reached out and touched a wet spot. His fingers came away slick with blood. He knew instantly why the quiet felt wrong. Someone else was here. Someone who didn’t belong.

He bounded up the porch steps, feeling for the concealed carry tucked into the back of his cargo pants. The screen door burst open a foot from his face and Lark appeared.

“He was here,” she said. “Cole Cartwright was here.”

“When?”

“He left just ten minutes ago. Gran gave him cash and her car keys.” She saw the blood smeared on his fingers and stopped short, mouth open in an unasked question.

“He threaten her?”

“She says he had a knife.” Her eyes returned to Daniel’s face. He saw now that they were a pale blue, absorbing the colors around them like the reflective surface of water. The anger in her face came unmasked. “She’s not hurt but she could’ve been. I never should have left.”

“It shook me up is all,” came a voice from the other side of the screen. Opal appeared with Snoop at her side. She coughed deeply, the bones in her chest stark against the rose-print nightgown.

Behind her, lamplight spilled in an empty foyer. There was a staircase directly ahead and a small table against the wall to her right. Fresh lilies bloomed in a blue vase, the

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picture of equanimity, but beneath Opal's house slippers, splotches of blood marred the woven rug.

"You sure you're not hurt, ma'am?"

Opal's white hair appeared snow-like under the lamp. "Poor boy was out of his mind, but he wouldn't have hurt me."

Lark's face was still, quiet, but the pulse in her throat beat rapidly. She addressed Daniel. "Police coming?"

"Should be here soon."

"Gran, sit out here with Daniel. I'll be right back."

Daniel helped Opal into a rocking chair.

"What I wouldn't give for a cigarette," the old lady said, her veined hand patting Daniel's arm.

"Afraid I can't help you there."

"No worries, son. I quit ten years ago," she replied and chuckled.

Lark reappeared with a shotgun and a glass of water. She handed the glass to Daniel.

"I'm sure you're thirsty."

"Thanks."

Lark kissed her grandmother's head then sat down at the top of the porch steps, the gun across her lap. She faced the yard as if waiting for the woods to yield another danger, her fierceness palpable.

"We found his brother," she said and her voice choked. "Somebody shot Trent and left him in the woods."

Opal didn't respond but her rocking chair creaked. The wind rustled. Katydid sang. Ordinary sounds that reminded Daniel of safe and ordinary things. But a safely spinning world seemed incongruous with such a night. He thought he heard a car on the road and put one hand on his Ruger LC9.

It had never been clear to him why he'd left Humble. After high school, there had been many factors at work. Plenty of reasons to stay. Starry nights and peach-colored sunrises. Mountains steeped in fog. A thousand parts that created home, like patches to a quilt.

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But tonight, he felt the answer nearby, as if it were a ghost about to speak. He'd never been able to reconcile how closely good and evil abided in these hills. How quickly beauty could be marred by violence. His own father was a living testament to contradictions.

"*Did you see,*" Opal said at length. "That's what Cole kept saying to me. *Did you see what it did?*"

Lark shivered and looked over her shoulder. "It?"

"I didn't have any idea what he was talking about. I asked how I could help. He said he needed money." Opal rocked harder. "He looked like death, so skinny and pale. I hardly recognized him. His eyes were blood red and his nose running snot. He was shaking so bad I thought he'd keel over."

Lark glanced at Daniel. "Withdrawal."

"Yep."

Opal smoothed her night dress over her knees. "Poor boy kept crying. Wailing, really. Couldn't tell if his shirt was soaking wet from tears or sweat. My heart broke for him."

She let out another deep-chested cough. Her hands shook as she touched her hair. Then her voice grew soft, aching with compassion. "He said to me, *I never would've done it if it hadn't made me.*"

Daniel watched Lark's face, wondering if she understood. If she saw how death stalked these hills. And if she saw, why she didn't leave.

But Lark's face was set like granite as she faced the forest line. The very air around her seemed to hum with anger. He could read the challenge in her posture. The strength.

The first glimpse of police lights flashed through the trees, and Daniel let go of the gun.